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SUBJECT: Finland: DOL Assistant Secretary for Policy

Leon R. Sequeira Visits

¶1. Department of Labor Assistant Secretary for Policy Leon R. Sequeira participated in a panel at the Nordic-American Dialogue at Hanasaari, a trans-Atlantic forum organized by the Swedish-Finnish Cultural Center in Helsinki Finland on March 3. On March 4, Sequeira discussed aging population issues with Professor Juhani Ilimarinen, the Director of Life Course and Work Theme at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health. He also discussed labor migration issues with Director-General Pentti Visanen of the Migration Department at the Finnish Ministry of the Interior.

¶2. Ilimarinen emphasized the need to keep the Finnish and European populations at work longer, noting that workers, employers, and society as a whole all play a role in this effort. Finnish retirement policy now provides a 4.5% per year additional incentive benefit to a worker postponing retirement after age 63 up to age 65. The number of older workers who take advantage of the incentives and remain in the work force is lower than in the US, but rising, Ilimarinen said. The Finnish Institute of Occupational Health has produced a survey that measures "Work Ability" and, using 7 questions, highlights changes necessary to keep any age worker productive. Ilimarinen requested more contact with potential survey users in the US in an effort to collect US workplace data.

¶3. Visanen discussed his ministry's attempts to attract foreign workers in order to fill gaps in key labor sectors in Finland. The GoF is seeking government-to-government memoranda of understanding (MOU) with countries from which workers have a history of emigrating to seek overseas employment. Finland's goal is to directly enlist the help of those governments in identifying qualified workers willing to travel to Finland and in eliminating any potential abuse on the "source country" end.

¶4. Visanen identified Ukraine, China, and Viet Nam as countries with which Finland has initiated such discussions. Traditionally Finland has depended on migrant workers from neighboring countries such as Sweden, Germany, Russia and the Baltic states. However, Visanen pointed out, the labor shortages associated with an aging population that those countries face -- especially Russia -- are more serious than Finland's. Finnish trade unions initially opposed programs designed to attract migrants to Finland, he added, but now have become more cooperative and have begun working with the GoF, for example to help establish policies to prevent erosion of prevailing wages for Finnish workers.

¶5. A/S Leon R. Sequeira has cleared this cable.

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